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Marjie Lundstrom: Woman's break from her past is a story of second chances

By Marjie Lundstrom -- Bee Columnist

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On the same day this week that Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger heard the case of Stanley "Tookie" Williams, an open house was taking place not far from the Capitol -complete with prison officials, state workers and festive holiday trimmings.

The low-key affair had nothing to do with convicted murderer Williams' epic bid for clemency, but it did have everything to do with the power of redemption and the grace of second chances.

On Thursday, the Prison Industry Authority, which provides California inmates with jobs and skills, held its open house to display the handiwork of some 5,600 inmates at 22 prisons -from stylish office furniture to roasted coffee beans to the proverbial license plates.

There was even a little Big House humor in the inmates' products, with a line of industrial cleaning solutions bearing such names as Cell Block 64, Break Out and All Clear.

But the real attraction of Thursday's event was a state employee named Christie Shows, a just-turned-50 woman who lit up the room as strains of the "Nutcracker Suite" softly played.

Shows, gliding through the Prison Industry showroom at 19th and X streets in a crisp black jacket and high-heeled boots, looked the part of a successful businesswoman and ambitious state government worker.

Which she is.

What she also is is a felon, a woman who plunged so deeply into the dark and destructive world of drugs that she was convicted in 1995 in Fresno of arson and solicitation of arson.

That netted her a five-year prison sentence at Valley State Prison for Women in Chowchilla, where she served three years after having spent a year in county jail.

"You get into that drug lifestyle," she said, "and you lose all common sense. You lose your moral core."

But as I said, this is a story about second chances and, unlike Williams -scheduled to be executed Tuesday -Shows is a classic example of rehabilitation.

In a remarkable journey, she was recently named a regional coordinator for the Prison Industry Authority and has moved back to Chowchilla.

Hiring a former inmate is unusual, though not unprecedented for the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. The Prison Industry Authority does not receive general fund dollars but is self-supporting, with Shows and other employees -including inmates -paid from the sale of products and services. A plan that could have gutted the program by no longer requiring state agencies to purchase inmate goods was averted earlier this year.

Shows' introduction to the program was far less festive than Thursday's show. Shortly after she arrived at Valley State Prison for Women, her first "bunkie" smashed her nose.

Not surprisingly, she wanted to work. "That was the one place you could go (in prison) and be safe."

Shows, who had drifted through jobs with a high school education, landed in the prison's optical factory where eyeglasses are made, starting at 30 cents an hour. She liked it; she was good at it.

By the time she was released in 1998, she had a marketable skill.

Now it doesn't happen this way for every inmate, and it probably doesn't happen this way for most. But Shows, who faced the same stigma and social obstacles as every newly released prisoner, went on to climb the corporate ladder with astonishing speed.

Borrowing an old briefcase from her father's closet, and piecing together business attire from thrift stores, she interviewed for three optical jobs. After acing the most advanced test, she accepted an entry position with LensCrafters in Visalia, her parents' home.

And up, up, she went through the ranks, leapfrogging others to become general manager of a new store in Roseville -which went on to post the company's best first-year results.

Shows eventually became a silent partner in a cosmetics procedures business, which she's still doing. But the road was destined to lead back to the prison system, though not in the way most inmates find their way back.

Shows now works for the Prison Industry Authority, helping inmates transition from a cell to the workplace.

"My success is not in spite of prison," she says. "It's because of it."

In a cynical world that eschews second chances, Shows is back in Chowchilla. And, she's behind bars.

The former inmate just bought a home in a gated community alongside a golf course.

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